



## The Way God Fights Battles

1 Samuel 17:1-58

Grace Church | 2.7.21

Today we come to perhaps the most well known story in the Biblical narrative, so let's just acknowledge that coming in. We are all coming with inherent interpretive bias to this text: we can picture the story in our heads, we can already begin to think about how to apply it based on application we have heard before. I'll be the first to say that this story is rightfully well-known. It comes at an extremely pivotal point in the narrative of 1 Samuel, and the history of Israel. Not only in the history of Israel, but in redemptive history, few characters stand out as much as David. He is a place-marker, a plumbline, for understanding how God has worked in history. And it's this point, this story, that sets him on that trajectory. God has just anointed a nobody teenager to become king. How is God going to get the nation behind him? How does this young man step out into the public eye? Through the one singular act of defeating Goliath, David is elevated with warp speed into the presumptive heir. This story is central.

Another reason why this Biblical story is so well-known is because the narrative drips with relatability. In any narrative, our first thought is often to find ourselves in the story. Who do we most identify with, what challenges of the story, which action and rising and falling, make sense to us. And to be frank: everyone can identify with this story. There is a clear villain, a clear hero, and what seems like an easy take away moral. And typically the moral of this story is expressed something like this: are you an underdog? Be courageous and bold like David, and you can face your Goliath.

What is going on in this typical interpretation is representative language. In fact, the Bible is slammed full with these kinds of representations: one idea being compared to something else. Theologians call this **Typology**. Typology is all about representation, the idea that something in a story or a text can point us forward to something else. Here is how Graham Cole defines typology in one sentence:

Typology: The idea that persons (e.g., Moses), events (e.g., the exodus), and institutions (e.g., the temple) can—in the plan of God—prefigure a later stage in that plan and provide the conceptuality necessary for understanding the divine intent.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Graham Cole, *He Who Gives Life*, 289



So we come to David and Goliath, and we have these two figures in the story, both seem larger than life. Goliath, literally larger than life, but David too—his actions seemingly so brave and heroic that they appear to us more fantasy than reality. The kind of typology you may be familiar with in this text says that David is prefiguring modern Christians, the underdogs, and that Goliath is prefiguring the enemies or obstacles of Christians. We see David, and we think: “that’s us! We are the underdogs. David represents normal, unimpressive humanity when we are faced with an overwhelming challenge.” The problem with this interpretation is not that there is no typology in this text. This story is so well-known and works so powerfully on our hearts *because* it is full of typology. The reason this interpretation is incredibly flawed and even dangerous is because the typology is completely illogical and foreign to the text!

Nowhere in this text do we see David prefiguring followers of Jesus. No where in the text does he even mean to provide an example for the Israelites! Again and again the author makes David *less* relatable to us, not more. The extreme story of David—straight from the fields with his sheep to battle with Goliath—is meant to be seen as impossible, and superhuman, and as divine. David himself says so in the story, where again and again he does not boast in his own ability and say “act like me” but rather solely boasts in the ability of God.

So how may we begin to see this text through right typological lenses? Well, it’s not too difficult, and you don’t have to be a Biblical scholar. Remember that our entire time in 1 Samuel we have been emphasizing that these are not stories about David or Saul or Samuel—ultimately they are stories revealing the character of God. So we start there, not with: “what does this text reveal about David, but what does this text reveal about God?”. Secondly, we place our story in the context. Last week we saw God saying as loud and clear as he could: I don’t see people like you do, and I don’t judge circumstances like you do. You look outwardly, I look at the heart. The anointing of the runt of the family was example one of that. David and Goliath is example two. Last week we also saw the stark contrast between David and Saul: one filled with the Spirit, one filled only with a tormenting spirit. Here then in this story we have another contrast between God’s ways and man’s ways.

So we come to this story and we can say with confidence: this is not just a story about how David fought his battles. This is a story about how God fights his battles. This is not just a story about David’s courage, this is a story about God’s subversive authority. This is not just a story about how to be like David, it’s a story about standing in awe of a God who brings David to save us. And in this story we find another contrast, just like last week. But if last week the contrast was between what God sees and what we see, here the contrast is between how God fights and how we fight.

Let’s then consider how we fight our battles, and how that is different from how God does.



## The Fantasy of the Faithless

Three characters stand out in this story who aren't David. All of them are more your typological counterpart than David. In other words: we are far far more like Goliath and Saul and the Israelites than like David. I can say this confidently because we act just like them. And the primary identifier we have with these three groups is this: when fear comes, when adversity comes, when a situation arises in which we must have courage to fight: we respond with fantasy. Let me show you what I mean.

### Goliath: the fantasy of vanity

The very first image we have in this story is of Goliath. The way he is described, it's as if he is meant to hulk over the entire narrative until the end. That's why he comes first. He is the shadow. Let's take a dive into the person and character of Goliath.

**Verse 1** the Philistines have gathered their armies for battle. No doubt they have heard about Saul's madness and tormenting spirit. He is not the Saul he used to be, so now is the time to strike. **Verse 2-3** the Israelites are encamped across the valley from them, in a place where they can form two lines with space in the middle. No one has the clear upper hand, they are at a bit of standstill. So, **verse 4**, the Philistines send out Goliath. The idea is that in order to save too much bloodshed, a champion will be chosen from each army to represent the people. In Hebrew, "champion" literally means "man of in-between". It's clear here Goliath is meant to represent all of Philistia.

And it seems they have chosen the right man. He is an actual giant. His height is said to be six cubits and a span, which depending on the meaning of the original texts was somewhere between 7 and 9 feet tall. The text mentions this man is from Gath, a Philistine city. It is worth mentioning that the theme of Giants in Canaan, the land of Israel and Philistia, is a significant biblical theme. You remember when Joshua and Caleb were sent with spies from Israel to search out the land of Canaan they were promised, they said they saw *giants* in the land. The task given them by God was to devote these giants, known as the sons of Anak or Anakim, to destruction. They did so, except not fully. Joshua 11:21-22 tells us: "There was none of the Anakim left in the land of the people of Israel. Only in Gaza, in Gath, and in Ashdod did some remain."

So here comes Goliath, a descendent of the ancient foes of Israel, the ones whom everyone but Caleb and Josua were afraid of, a remnant of the line they were meant to completely cut off from the land. Israel was in need then of a new Joshua and Caleb, new giant killers. But this giant was no joke. Not only was he built like a tank, he was outfitted like one. **Verse 5-7** details extravagantly how he had a bronze helmet, very uncommon, and a coat of mail weighing the equivalent of 120 pounds. Not easy to carry. For all you basketball fans, this is Shaq, not Manute Bol. He has a javelin to throw, full body armor, and a spear with a head that would have weighed around 15 pounds. **Verse 8-10**, we find Goliath's character showing. He stands up calls out, his cry literally translates "am I not *the* Philistine"? He also calls the Israelites servants of Saul, not of Yawhen, identifying



them with a fractured and unstable king. In verse 10, he shows his cards. He defies the ranks of Israel—taunting them and mocking them.

Let's skip ahead to Goliath's second speech, in **43-44**. When the time comes for battle, Goliath looks at David and mocks him too, threatening to kill him and leave him out without burial, the ultimate shame for any man. But notice in **verse 43** the little note: goliath cursed David by his gods. What this means is that Goliath is comparing his gods to David's. He is saying: Dagon will deliver me, and curse you. He is making not just a personal insult, but a spiritual one. In doing so, he is not defying David, but God Almighty. Goliath is committing blasphemy against God, mocking and taunting Yawheh. That's not a good idea.

What does all of this show us about Goliath? He is extremely confident, we will give him that. He is not afraid of David or any man. But where does his confidence sit? His confidence is not rooted in reality. Perhaps he is right not to fear David and the Israelites: David is small and weak, and the Israelites are fearful and cowardly. But Goliath's mistake is that he does not fear God. He is so caught up in self-assertion and vanity that he has lost touch with reality. He should fear God, because although he cannot see him with his eyes, God is the real force at work here. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, and so Goliath has become the ultimate fool. He is living in fantasy land, thinking he can fight God with physical strength and weapons and armor.

Before we throw off Goliath as a blundering buffoon, consider how we often are taught to fight our battles. I remember how I was taught in high school to push through on the basketball court when I was winded and the fourth quarter came around: grit your teeth and man up. Or what advice do we often hear for those facing a difficult situation: "envision the victory in your mind, and go and get it." You can do anything you set your mind to, we say! The more we plaster over our fears with self-confidence, the more we become like Goliath, awash in a sea of vain fantasy.

The challenge Goliath makes is simple: if he wins, Israel will be subjected to Philistine rule. If the Israelites champion wins, Philistia will be subjected to Israelite rule. The problem is that Israel doesn't have a giant on their side. The closest man they have is Saul, who we know is described as "head and shoulders taller than any man in Israel". And Saul comes into the picture in **verse 11**.

### **Eliab and the Israelites: the fantasy of apathy**

So now we get this picture of the Israelites, cowering in fear. We will get to David in a moment, but for now let's see who is at the battle. **Verses 12-15** tell us David is not there—he is back with the sheep again. But his three oldest brothers are. In this story, they represent the typical Israelite. Skip ahead to **verse 21**. When David does get to the battle, everyone is going to the front of the lines and shouting at one another, and every morning and evening for forty days Goliath is giving his challenge and taunt. In the Scripture the number 40 represents testing.

**Verse 24**, no one can even stand up straight when Goliath comes out. They are so paralyzed by fear they run away. Not even the incentives of the king for defeating Goliath can sway anyone to



take the challenge. I want us to notice Eliab in **verse 28**. He is the first born, the one who looks like a king and Samuel mistook for one back in chapter 16. When he sees David asking about the battle, what does his fear turn to? Anger and presumption. In this way, he models Goliath. He sees David as below him, because he is stool looking at outward appearance. Rather than seeing wisely that David's confidence is a result of his faith and indwelling by the Spirit, he sees it as *evil*. His fear has made him jealous of David. Again, what is going on here? Eliab is living in a fantasy land, where he calls evil what is good. He cannot fathom the fact that David seems to be more afraid of God than Goliath.

Goliath was not afraid of man or God, and swallowed in vanity. Eliab and the Isrealites are afraid of man and not of God—a dangerous combo. In some way you could say they are worse off than Goliath. They may have knowledge of God, but they are not trusting him, and so they are powerless against their fear. Instead of seeking the face of God, they have succumbed to apathy. No man has the zeal to challenge Goliath, even to recognize his taunts for what they are: taunts against God. No man has the ambition to consider doing anything else but cowering, for forty straight days! And they are angry with anyone who exhibits and faithfulness. Goliath's fantasy has given him overconfidence, Eliab's fantasy has given him apathy.

One way to respond to fear and to the trials of life is to attempt to rise up and meet them in the vanity of our own strength. But another way is to run away and hide. Neither is Christian, because neither response rightfully places the emphasis on what God can do for those who trust in him. Both are defiance of God's ways in their own way.

### **Saul: the fantasy of invention**

Our last character here is Saul. He hears of David's confidence and calls him to his tent for questioning. But one look at David, and he doesn't trust him to fight Goliath. **Verse 33**, he cannot see with God's eyes. After David gives him his credentials in **34-37**, Saul concedes, but his fear has driven him to a different place than Goliath or the Isrealites. Saul wants to equip David to look the part, so he clothes him with his armor in **verses 38-39**.

Of course, none of this works for David. He has neither the size or the experience to feel at ease in Saul's armor. But let's pause for a moment and consider Saul. He is chosen and blessed by God with the Spirit for a time, a valiant warrior in his own right. But as we are used to when discussing him, he is totally blind. As one commentator says: "his imagination is restricted by the inventions of the day."<sup>2</sup> The way Saul fights battles is with Saul's weapons. Throughout the rest of 1 Samuel, Saul will consistently be seen holding a spear, a tip of the cap by the author to show us: now the Spirit has left him, the only thing Saul has left to fight with is brute force.

---

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*



Saul is certainly afraid of Goliath, but at least concedes for David to face him. And still, his fear drives him towards confidence not in God's provision, but in the invention of man. Consider how, like Saul, we are prone to fight our battles in this way. Perhaps we escape the trap of vanity and of apathy, but our confidence is built on something outside of ourselves that is not God. Yes, God can use the weapons of therapy to fight our anxiety, and the weapons of practical wisdom to fight our sinfulness. But relying on worldly weapons as a means to themselves deChristianize our faith. If we no longer need the miracle of faith, the miracle of the incarnation, the miracle of the cross, then our faith is not Christian at all, our faith is in the things God makes rather than God himself. This is not the way God fights his battles, as David clearly states in **verse 47**.

This is how the natural man fights against the fears of the world: by the fantasy of vanity, the fantasy of apathy, and the fantasy of invention. All of them are out of touch with what is real. All of them deny that God is truly in control, that God is the true rescuer.

The alternative to living in this fantasy land is to look to reality. And reality is seen not with physical eyes, but with eyes of faith. David is the type of the faithful servant, so let's look to him in our text now.

## The Character of God's Champion

First, notice David's **obedience**. When we are first introduced to David in this text in **verse 12**, we are reminded that he is the youngest in **verse 14**. And immediately, as the youngest, we recognize that he is not old enough for battle. The only way he arrives in the first place is through the providence of God in the command of his father Jesse. **Verse 17-18**, he is given a task. A simple task: he is a messenger. Go and give some provisions, get news, and come back. Not a warrior, but a messenger. **Verse 20**, David wakes up early, *just as Jesse commanded him*. He comes to the battlefield at exactly the right time to hear Goliath's boast, which the author notes in **verse 23**. We should be struck by our picture of David. He could not be more different than Goliath. Goliath is clad in heavy armor and weapons. What is David armed with? Bread and cheese. He is a warrior from birth, David, a shepherd. But here is one thing David has that Goliath and the Israelites and Saul does not have. A spirit of obedience.

David has courage, because obedience has brought him to this point. He is a simple kid, just doing what his Father says. And it is this heart of obedient faith that puts him in the position he needs to be in: to hear the challenge of Goliath.

Second, notice David's **zeal**. We should immediately be taken aback as well by the response of David to hearing Goliath's charge. Immediately he sees through him in **verse 26**. He calls him an uncircumcised Philistine. He is not a giant to David, simply an enemy of God. David has God-sight, he is seeing reality. And that reality gives him incredible zeal for God's honor. He is not personally offended, he is offended because Goliath is mocking God. It's this zeal that gives David the confidence to stand before Saul. When Saul questions him about his credentials, David mentions



the bear and the lions he has had to kill. But it's not as if David is a hunter. No, he is a *protector*. He goes after these lions in care for the sheep. They threatened not him, but the sheep he protected. So it's natural that he sees Goliath's challenge in the same way in **verse 36**. It's not self-confidence that drives David to fight Goliath, it's a desire to protect the people of God, it's a zeal for the honor of God and the people of God that fuels him. Notice the significance of his words in **verse 37**: he trusts God will back up his zeal with divine blessing. God will do this work: David is simply the instrument.

Third, notice David's **weakness**. He is so confident in God's provision, he knows he does not need Saul's armor. He adopts the way of weakness. Instead of outfitting himself in the best weapons of the day, he goes with what God has used through him in the past. A shepherd's staff and sling. The sling was a real weapon, but not one that Goliath notices. When Goliath sees him in **verse 43**, he notes only the staff. Goliath is so confident in his superiority he is blind to the threat of David, even when David threatens him. I love David's monologue in **verses 45-47**. Not a mention of his own strength, his own skill, his own prowess or speed. All of this is God's work.

Typically we see David as the underdog who rises above his limitations and weakness. But that is not how he is presented here. Goliath is totally unprepared for David's assault. He misses the sling, and he forgets David is quick on his feet without any armor. Before he can get to him, David rushes him and puts him on his back. What does all this show us? David doesn't win the battle in spite of his weakness, but because of it. His apparent weakness is his biggest strength. The anointed one of God, **verse 50**, has no sword in his hand. So he uses Goliath's own weapon to finish the job, a sign of true dominance. He cuts his head for proof of his victory, sending it as far as Jerusalem to tell all the peoples of God's triumph. But all of this is not in spite of his weakness, but because of it. His weakness is the way to God's great use of him.

The text ends with an exchange between Saul and Abner and David. Although Saul would have recognized David at this point, since he would have likely been his musician, we remember that 1 Samuel is not as tied to linear story telling as we are. It's likely the history of David and Goliath falls after David is a musician in Saul's court but before he is promoted to armor bearer and moves in with Saul. So Saul would be familiar with him, but not necessarily enough to know his background and family. Here he must inquire, since now David's whole family has been promised tax-exemption for life and David is promised Saul's daughter in marriage. But I love the way the narrative ends: with David's pronouncement of himself. He is Saul's servant still, not the mighty warrior, but simply the son of Jesse. God has done this work, not him. David is not our ultimate example, just God's instrument for victory. But through his victory, we learn how God fights. He uses obedience, zeal, and weakness.





## A Tale of Two Champions

If David is not our ultimate example in this text, that who is? Let's go back to our discussion typology. What exactly is going on in this text? Remember the main literary piece of this story: it's a battle, a one-on-one battle. It's a tale of two champions. On one side, there is Goliath. Saul, Eliab, the Israelites and us think he will win, and are caught in his spell. But on the other side, there is David. He is caught in God's spell, his mind is God-enchanted, his heart captured by God's spirit. Both of these champions represent the people: so thank goodness for Saul and the faithless Israelites—when God wins the battle through David, they win also. How does God fight battles? He does so through a representative: one who is obedient, zealous with love for God's glory and God's people, one who is gloriously weak. If this is a story primarily about the way God fights his battles, is it an isolated incident?

No, Christian, it isn't. The way God fights the Philistines through David is the way God has always fought. And it's the way God has fought against sin and death and Satan for you in Christ. Jesus Christ is the obedient, zealous, anointed warrior of redemptive history. He is the type of David, the one David is pointing to.

Here are some things you may have missed in our story. Goliath is the ancient foe of God's people, the Giant who they must overcome to enter the promised land. So too Satan is the ancient foe of God's people, the one who we must overcome to enter back into Eden, the land of promise. The word for Goliath's armor is not just coat of mail. It is literally translated as scales, the same word used to describe both snakes in the Old Testament and the dragon of the New Testament. So Satan, in his first temptation, was clothed in scales. Goliath is called uncircumcised: he does not bear the mark of the covenant people. Because of this, he is described as being a beast: a bear, a lion, a dog—he bears the mark of the beast, not of God. For forty days, Goliath accuses and taunts and tempts the people of God in the wilderness of Israel, just as Satan did to Jesus. Goliath's primary sin is not his violence against God's people: he never gets the chance to spill blood. No, his offense is blasphemy: he taunts and mocks God, just like the snake in the garden first blasphemed God by saying: "Did God really say?". Make no mistake, our text is screaming at us: God's enemy is not the Philistines. God's enemy is Satan, the master of sin and death. And he is your enemy, church. He is the lion prowling in the wilderness, tempting the people of God. He is the one you must overcome, the accuser of God's people.

But you can't defeat him yourself. No way—your anointing left the moment you breathed in this sin scarred world. Fear took its grip on you from birth, leading you down the road to vanity and apathy and faith in human invention, and away from fear of God. Just as your forefather Adam submitted to the serpent, Adam becomes your representative as you submit to your sin. Your champion is Goliath, your master is Satan.

But God has a champion too. He comes out of Bethlehem, just like David. He comes into the world not as a mighty warrior, but as an unexpected messenger. He is obedient to his Father, coming





down to be like his brothers and meet them on the front line of the battle. It was his food to do the will of his father who sent him. He comes at the right time, and he heard the mocks of the accuser and is not silent, but is zealous for God's house and God's people. He has the skills of a shepherd, ready to defend the sheep from the attack of the beast. He is like Adam, but without sin, so he has true dominion over all beasts. He came to earth clothed in meekness and weakness, never rising above it but triumphing because of it. After forty days in the wilderness, he went about his work. The penalty for the sin of Blasphemy is stoning to head—so Goliath got his due, and so does Satan. His birth was promised, that the seed of Eve, from the line of David, would come to crush the head of the serpent. Just as his father beheaded Dagon in his temple and David beheaded Goliath with his sword, he beheaded the serpent with his own weapon: the Roman cross. And by his resurrection, he paraded his victory of the enemy around Jerusalem, the city of David, just as Goliath's head was paraded.

Friends, this isn't coincidental wordplay. I am not pulling these connections out of thin air. God brought you here today to hear an ancient story of an anointed king achieving victory so you could be told of a better anointed king who has purchased victory for you. How does God fight his battles? He does it in Christ. Stop fighting with vanity, with apathy, and with your own skill and invention. Come rather into the arms of Christ for protection and peace. Run to the victory of Christ, revel in it and rejoice.

